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*Journal of Inclusive cities and Built environment*. Vol. 1 No.1

**How to cite:** Alalade, G. and Chipungu, L. 2021. Challenges of Vulnerable Immigrants: A Focus on Refugees and Housing, Their Canadian Experience. *Journal of Inclusive cities and Built environment*. Vol. 1 No.1, Pg 17-24.

## **CHALLENGES OF VULNERABLE IMMIGRANTS: A FOCUS ON REFUGEES AND HOUSING, THEIR CANADIAN EXPERIENCE**

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*Published March 2021*

### **ABSTRACT**

The refugee and immigrant problem in Canada are gradually descending into a crisis. Women and elderly people are among the categories of people who experience differentiated integration processes and some forms of discrimination in society. A percentage of immigrants live in poverty, insecurity, and social exclusion, for these individuals, may be in great distress, itinerant, or living in precarious housing conditions. This dire situation made this research imperative to better understand the challenges and measures needed to address the housing challenges of these vulnerable groups. This paper examines the immigrant and refugees housing challenges in Canada. Immigrants and refugees find themselves under diminished capacity as an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of the natural or man-made hazard. Qualitative research method was adopted, and data were generated by both primary and secondary sources. Focus groups and policymakers were also interviewed to come up with a logical conclusion on the topic of discussion. The study concludes that there are tripartite causes of housing challenges for refugees and migrants cannot be overemphasized, and it is interconnected to economic, political, and cultural systems. Also, that at best, what has been obtainable is ethnic-specific efforts targeted at some certain migrant groups, which further creates ethical dilemmas as different groups of refugees and different groups of immigrants receive different levels of assistance which is not sustainable, and also antithetical to recommendations from international organizations whose mandate is to ensure quality and adequate housing as a pressing human right issue. The study concluded that creating economic opportunities for migrants and refugees, making information, quality housing, more available and accessible. Also, when housing providers bring cultural agencies into social housing, it would go a long way in mitigating the challenges housing by immigrants and refugees in Canada.

**KEY WORDS** Immigrants; refugees; housing challenges

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commission of Refugees' convention of 1951 has affirmed by 145 countries, addressed the core principle as non-refoulement, that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom. This declaration is now considered a rule of customary international law. The Canadian government's interpretation of the UNHR convention has further made refugees and immigrants coming into Canada to claim asylums even more vulnerable to housing problems. Housing is recognized as a human right, the right to shelter, which is to have a place to lay one's head and secure one's possessions is deemed to be a right of every individual and this has made people coming into Canada to claim asylums more vulnerable to housing problems, than any other group in the country and made them suffer from their lack of inclusion in their host communities.

Refugee challenges and experiences are multifaceted and wide-ranging. The study of refugees has been extended in recent years, as intellectuals such as Aldiabat, K. et al. (2021), identify the distinctive challenges that refugees face in first-world nations which have been one the most desired destinations for refugees, which Canada is glaringly part of, Marks (2017). Hence, there have been discourses as to how the international community must overcome to provide services to this population. Attention to the problematic experience of these populations has also grown within the non-governmental and international organizational communities, Kofi and Cranfield (2009).

Moreover, the vulnerability of the Refugee has been seen as an inevitable syndrome even in the most developed of nations, as against different international conventions, and also different national constitutional rights. These susceptibilities as been argued not only to be down to insensitivities on the hands of the systems in which these refugees find themselves, whether (developed nation or developing nations). Sociologists like Simich & Beiser et al, (2005) believe that a new environment

by default affects human ecology which more often than not puts the human into a state of weakness, which is controlled by their sense of adaptability (Terziev, 2019).

However, there several other challenges that are faced by everyday refugees which are beyond their socio-cultural adaptability, but also the socio-economic enablement available in the community they find themselves, Turner, Beegheley, and Powers (2002). A quintessential example of these challenges that are not only controlled by their sense of socio-cultural adaptability is the challenge of housing. This empirically has been identified as problematic in Canada who is one of the countries with the highest number of refugees in the continent of America.

Canada, just like Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria where there has been the continual arrival of refugees has caused significant increases in the price of food, fuel prices and placed new pressures on the housing market and public services, Crisp, Riera, and Shahira(2009). It is, however, important to note that various other vulnerabilities of these refugees drop more jarring effect on the doorstep of the housing challenge, Briant & Kennedy (2004). Hence, it is on the back of this that this study interrogates refugees' vulnerabilities and the pivotal position of housing in the experience of refugees in Canada.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Roughly 220,000 persons have immigrated to Canada each year between first half of the first decade of millennium. New immigrants enter Canada under various immigration categories and are largely categorized by the government into Economic Class immigrants, Family Class immigrants, and Protected Persons or Refugees. Over the past years, newcomers to Canada have come from wide range source countries, are increasingly well-educated. For instance, a Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC), shows that, 55% of immigrants surveyed had a university degree, and another 17% reported completion of some higher education (Statistics

Canada 2013). Hence a good number of these immigrants have overwhelmingly settled in Canada's urban centers, such as Toronto, Vancouver or Montréal, Wayland 2007. However, the placement of extremely low-income and vulnerable populations of the society into very expensive cities and communities in the country should go with additional supports from the government.

It is a trite knowledge that immigration is vital to Canada's population growth. It is on record that international immigration is responsible for population growth between 2001 and 2006. According to Wayland, despite being more highly educated and skilled than previous immigrants, recent immigrants have not fared as well as their predecessors in terms of employment and earnings. They would probably depend on social service or live below the poverty line. Their settlement is undermined by a cluster of interrelated legal and policy obstacles that hinder their access to economic opportunities and vital services, Wayland 2007.

Also, the 2016 Census showed that one in four recent immigrants are in core housing need (Morneau, 2019). Inexperience with language and navigation of the housing system, Schwan, Versteegh, Perri, Caplan, Baig, Dej, Jenkinson, Brais, Eiboff, & Pahlevan Chaleshtari, (2020), asylum seekers and refugees are at a greater risk of experiencing homelessness and housing precarity due to factors such as limited economic resources, interpersonal and systemic discrimination of newcomers. Findings of the 2018 National Point-in-Time Count indicate that 14% of those experiencing homelessness in 2018 were newcomers to Canada (Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), 2019).

Similarly, there is no gainsaying the fact that continual refugee peopling just like various other forms of migration is usually marked with demographic challenges that affect planning, David, (2011). The resultant effect of this has led to the attainment of inordinate large population size in Canada, especially in urban areas, leading to virtual collapse in the urban services marked by basic problems in the field of housing

infrastructure, and other amenities that are attached to the housing, such as water, energy affordability concerns and so on.

Moreover, It is becoming a trite knowledge that housing challenges witnessed by refugees not only in Canada but in various other developed nations are not only caused by the inefficient housing policies or inadequate housing infrastructures but also considerably owing to the attitudinal dispositions of the local populations towards these refugees, Campbell (2006). The Canadian experience has shown that the local population often takes advantage of refugees' vulnerability by offering them exploitative conditions and housing rates especially in the informal sector, Walsh, 2015.

Conversely, having Identified the governmental challenges and the relation between the local population and these refugees, as regards the exigencies of housing experiences for immigrants especially the refugees in Canada, it salient to note that sometimes the strategies immigrants and refugees employ to gain access to housing in Canada has been observed to be counterproductive, Agrawal (2018). Therefore, it will appear that just as the vulnerabilities of refugees in Canada are complex, the causation for housing challenges for these groups is also multifaceted, which will be discussed in the later part of this attempt.

### 3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To assess the governmental and administrative causes of housing challenges among refugees in Canada.
2. To interrogate the contributions of the local population to the housing challenges of refugees in Canada.
3. To examine the strategies immigrants and refugees employ to gain access to housing in Canada.

### 4. RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What are the contributions of the Canadian Government to housing Challenges for refugees in Canada?
2. What are the effects of the local population in the Problematic housing experience by refugees in Canada?
3. How have Canadian refugees contributed to the increasing challenge of housing for their community?

### 5. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The strong commitment showed by the Canadian Government to the UNHR convention acted partly as a pull factor for immigrants and refugees to seek asylum in Canada, UNHR Convention (1951). This has further put Canada in the condition of housing deficit and housing exclusivity over the years. Therefore, the significance of this study can be located in the importance attached to infrastructural efficiency as one of the indices for development. Also, as expressed by various international development organizations such as the United Nations, Homeless International, Housing and Land Right Network, Habitat International Coalition, to mention a few. Especially as it concerns housing, as a matter of human rights as enshrined in article 25 (1) of The Universal Declaration OF Rights, UNHABITAT, (2010).

In the same vein, giving the increasing globalization of the socio-economic system, the need to address policy inclusivity becomes more important especially in the area of housing which stands at the centerpiece of sustainable development. This is huge because housing development and inclusivity consume resources in its construction, maintenance, and use on a larger scale, and also contribute to human dignity, Golubchikov, and Badyina (2012).

The importance of housing stability was further stressed by Aubry, Nelson, and Tsemberis (2015), to be related to mental health. Indeed, mental health program is said to have been initiated in the ideology of Housing First. In the case

of Housing First, the North American evidence is undeniable that it is effective in ending homelessness for a majority of individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness, especially migrants and refugees.

Finally, the attempt becomes very pertinent as it represents a shared breakaway from the mainstream understanding of the challenge of adequate housing by immigrants most especially amongst refugees in developed nations like Canada. However, this study offers a two-way trilogy approach in dissecting the albatross of housing and also, trilogy models of formulating policies and implementing the policies for an effective housing system for migrants in Canada.

### 6. METHODOLOGY

In other to capture appropriately the Canadian refugee experience, with regards to challenges of housing. The study adopts a qualitative research method. Data was generated using both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources include journals articles published books and unpublished works on refugees, immigrants, and housing were consulted to understand the previous literature on the subject. Primary sources on the other hand were gotten from organizational conventions, and statutes, the official publication by organizations with human rights and housing mandates, such as the Canadian Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program, the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program, and the In-Canada Asylum Program. Due to the exploratory nature of the research question and the fact that resources were not available to conduct interviews in multiple languages, a qualitative study design was used. A semi-structured interview with focused groups of women and children from both the local immigrants and refugee households was conducted, Although the exact response rate was not recorded, approximately 30 refugees' groups and families were invited to participate, and most refugees agreed to be interviewed. The most common reasons for refusing to participate were a lack of time or anxiety regarding confidentiality because the interviews

were to be recorded and that the subject matter of the interviews related to their immigration status. The semi-structured interviews were 45 minutes long and conducted with assistance from an interpreter when needed. Local policymakers and policy implementers in the area of refugee settlement and housing were also interviewed, and all these were interpreted logically using the narrative analysis method to have a meaningful and objective conclusion on the topical issues raised in this study.

## 7. DISCUSSIONS

Low-income families have been continuously priced out of the housing market in Canada over the last thirty years due to the lack of sufficient investment in the provision of affordable housing (Whitzman & Desroches, 2020), this includes new immigrants and refugees (Rose & Charette, 2017). Currently, approximately one in eight Canadian households live in unaffordable and below-standard homes (Whitzman & Desroches, 2020). Finding adequate, affordable housing for resettled refugees represents a significant hurdle regardless of the sponsorship stream (Agrawal, 2018). A study conducted in Edmonton shows that one of the most common reasons for homelessness amongst the Private Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) was sponsors setting up housing that they could no longer afford after one year of their arrival in Canada (Arnault & Merali, 2019). In some cases, sponsors may not have the best interest of the refugees at heart, even though they meant well by looking for affordable housing far away from their neighborhoods, yet they fail to see how newcomers may prefer to live in places with people from the same cultural background (Wood et al., 2011). The fact remains that one key issue with the PSR program is that it relies on significant levels of care by members of society who perform enormous amounts of unpaid labour – even more so when they lack experience. As a designated refugee reception centre with a long history of engaged community mobilizing. Ottawa has a well-established settlement sector that was organized in preparation for Operation Syrian Refugees (OSR), (Carrière, 2016). Ottawa's only Resettlement Assistance Program

(RAP) -serving agency, the Catholic Centre for Immigrants (CCI), helped resettle about 1,200 Syrian Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) in a three-month period, whereas previously they served about 500 GARs annually (CCI, 2016). At a total of 1,275 people, Ottawa received the second-highest number of Syrian refugees in Ontario between November 2015 and September 2016 (Rose & Charette, 2020). The case of Ottawa provides a unique opportunity to examine how a mid-sized city successfully managed some of the highest numbers of newcomers during the OSR/SRRI (and beyond). Like many other Canadian cities, the Ottawa rental housing market is strained (Whitzman & Desroches, 2020). At \$85,981, Ottawa's median household income is 22.24% higher than the national average (Statistics Canada, 2016). However, the proportion of the overall households in Ottawa that are considered very-low income is much higher than similar-sized cities, which suggests that there is upward pressure on rents (Whitzman & Desroches, 2020). Before the OSR/SRRI, Ottawa's housing market was relatively stable and affordable. From 2010 to 2015, the vacancy rates for a three or more-bedroom apartment never fell below 2.2%, and the average cost only saw an overall 5.9% annual increase (CMHC, 2020; Scoles, 2021).

### 7.1 INTERGOVERNMENTAL ROLES IN HOUSING CHALLENGES OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN CANADA

Delving into the discussion, it would be more strategic to first discuss the role of the Canadian government in the housing challenges of immigrants and refugees. The government plays a central role in creating, sustaining, and changing the housing system. It establishes and enforces the rules of engagements guiding the modus operandi through banking and mortgage lending practices, to tax and regulatory measures affecting building materials, professional practices, subsidy programs, and incentive patterns for average households, all of these they can do through legislation, policy formulation, policy implementation, or creation of think tanks on housing, Hulchanski (2003).

The foregoing explains the involvement and evolution of the Canadian government with regards to housing. A policy such as *The Land Assembly Program* was formulated in the 1950s, *Funds for Urban Renewal and Municipal Infrastructures* in the 1960s. In the 1970s the federal government shifted funds into *Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Home Insulation and Neighborhood Improvement Program*, Dennis and Fish (1972). Subsequently in the 1980s following the withdrawal of funding for new supportive housing, the Canadian Center for Public-Private Partnership brought together third sector agencies to provide cost-effective housing for low-income households, Golberg (1983).

In the 2000s, the federal housing policies revolve around ecological sustainability to avoid emissions, and energy sources by encouraging housing in downtowns. More recently, the National Housing Strategy by the federal government (Government of Canada, 2017). The strategy commits to introducing legislation that will promote a human rights-based approach to housing.

It is, however, instructive to note that, Canadian settlement policy is controlled through different public and nonprofit organizations, referred to as the "settlement sector", Wayland (2007). Although, settlement services are funded by the federal government and provincial governments, however, some cities and counties offer specific programming supports as well. Case in point, Quebec took responsibility for its own settlement services since 1991, while British Columbia, Manitoba, Alberta, and most recently Ontario have negotiated their own agreements with the federal government. This makes housing and other settlement services vary across the country but the range of services offered generally includes the provision of information to new arrivals, orientation and counseling, language instruction in English or French, and employment services, which include Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) receive financial and other support for one year from their date of arrival in Canada. Yet, Canada is late in adopting legislation that are non-discriminatory with regards to housing especially when compared to some European countries.

The legislation would require the federal government to maintain a strategy that prioritizes the housing needs of those who are most vulnerable. Aubry, (2020).

Similarly, the majority of Canada's refugees are not acknowledged as refugees until after they have been living in Canada for years after they file a claim for refugee status on Canadian soil. The considerable housing needs experienced by these refugee claimants and persons living without official status in Canada have been met with a small degree by refugee-oriented housing facilities funded by religious communities, municipalities, and other stakeholders, which adds to the toll of housing deficits for migrants and especially refugee, Wayland (2007).

In the same vein, despite series of housing policies that have been formulated and implemented by the Canadian government, it needs to be stated that the shortcomings of these policies have become more visible as opined by Novac et al (2002) where he observes that the de-housing process in Canada produces Diaspora of the excluded. This was further documented by series of official publications that gazette that 15% of Canadian hostel users are immigrants and refugees alike, and also from an oral interview with a sizeable portion of these refugees confirmed that race is still a barrier to equal housing treatment in Canada's Housing markets, Dion, (2001).

Similarly, research has shown that there are structural and systemic failures that have been found to be the oil that lubricates the wheels of youth homelessness, especially amongst refugees. According to Shewchuk (2019), these failures include broader societal issues such as poverty, discrimination, and poor coordination and integration across systems that increase the possibility that people will become homeless. Hence, the failures to support the transitional needs of young people living on child welfare have been found to result in housing instability, with migrants and refugees has the most vulnerable

However, although housing in developed nations is regarded as social benefits, the

Canadian housing system encourages exclusivity by allocating differential benefits for two groups of citizens, based on whether they are in the primary-secondary part of the housing system. This no doubt further puts immigrants and refugees into double jeopardy in their experience of humane housing in Canada, Esping-Anderson (1990), and thus the governmental roles in the housing challenges for refugees and immigrant represents primary barriers in getting quality housing.

## **7.2 LOCAL POPULATION ROLES IN HOUSING CHALLENGES OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN CANADA**

Housing policies and their effective implementation, are not formulated and implemented without their cultural colorations, derived from the settlement partners, economic capability, architectural essence to mention but a few. All of these come to bear in the outlook of housing policy which is further amplified by the local population who have experienced these cultural characteristics, Hulchanski (2003). Just like pre-colonial African cities, the socio-economic and cultural intricacies also rare their head in the housing systems of developed western nations such as Canada.

Moreover, despite the considerable effort of the Canadian government to operate a more inclusive housing system over the years, the fact that housing inclusivity or otherwise can not only be hinge on governmental efforts but a couple with other factors such as jobs inclusivity, economic inclusivity, and so on, which has ensured that infrastructural efforts within local population become very important. It was largely a consensus amongst our interviewees who are migrants and refugees that, Local population sets rents rate three times higher to them when compared to the rates given to co-host community members, this can be corroborated by the assertion of Campbell (2006).

Furthermore, the exploitative exploits of the local population against migrants and refugees alike reflect in the job inclusivity, which by default has spillover effects

on the housing experience. The data on Canadian housing conditions reveal that Canadians are divided into two very different groups according to housing tenure. Owners are not only wealthier but have twice the income of renters, (Statistics Canada, Survey of Financial Security, 1984, 1999, 2008). Canada's housing system has two pools of housing consumers with dramatically different incomes and assets, even though the system has only one housing market, Hulchanski, (2003). On the back of this, immigrants most especially refugees are hard hit by such a system, this is huge because most of them are low-income earners, who work in firms owned by a member of the host community where they are underpaid, pushing them off the rung of housing and house ownership, (FGD 1, 2020).

## **7.3 IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEES STRATEGIES AS A FACTOR TO HOUSE CHALLENGE TO HOUSING MIGRANTS AND REFUGES IN CANADA**

It is important to observe that the previously discussed factors have conditioned refugees and immigrants to a adopt series of strategies in accessing housing especially in the urban neighborhoods of Canada, which exacerbate their housing situation. Many of our respondents who are immigrants or refugees reiterate that having kids makes that at a disadvantage of accessing good housing in Canada. Hence, some of them adopt the strategies of not declaring the number of their kids, which makes them live in un-occupying facilities, while some adopt the strategy of laying off their kids who are adults, (FGD 2, 2020) These add up to the number of homeless people or the number of people with rough nights in Canada.

Furthermore, a host of refugees and migrants have been de-housed due to the language barrier. Some of our respondent claim that they do not have enough information on how to find a home, while some who are not suffering from the language barrier does not understand some technical terms in housing such as zoning, catchment and so on, and a good number of

them also claimed that they do not know anyone who is available to help them find a house. Hence, being at the cultural disadvantage of language, these immigrants and refugees found it difficult in taking steps in breaking the communication gap that has contributed to their de-housing process in Canada, (FGD 3, 2020).

As emphasized in the statement of the problem, that part of the chronic challenges that is enabling homelessness housing situations of immigrants and refugees in Canada, as to do with the economic vulnerability of these immigrants and refugees who are unemployed. However, it is salient to note that during the long waiting period of confirming the refugee status of refugee claimants, they are given the liberty to apply for temporary permits to work and study, where they are eligible for social assistance in most provinces, CIC (2020). However, their insecure status makes it more difficult for them to find employment and rental accommodation, Hiebert, D. et al. (2013).

By and large, the forgoing illuminates that, the jarring experience of refugees and immigrants with regards to housing is caused by many but interconnected factors. Hence, the strategies adopted by refugees in having access to good homes that solves housing and logistic problems are also informed by other factors such as governmental policies, and local population relations with these groups of people.

## 8. CONCLUSION

One of the striking findings of this study is that getting appropriate housing is more challenging for immigrants than it is for Canada's native-born population. Moreover, with the burgeoning growth of immigration and housing scholarship in Canada over the three decades, researchers have increasingly become aware that today it is difficult to locate the reality of the average immigrant in Canada, Ley, and Smith (2000). Rather, differences in outcomes in a disproportionate ratio of inappropriate housing amongst the Canadian population are likely attributable to variables such as the category of admission, ethnic group, and place of

residence, language, income level, and so on.

From the forgoing the tripartite causes of housing challenges for refugees and migrants cannot be overemphasized, which have also been interconnected owing to economic, political, and cultural systems. Newcomers are most likely to experience multiple aspects of disadvantage resulting from these barriers. Immigrant and refugee groups are impacted differently by these factors in a variety of ways, these then lead to a variety of experiences of housing-related discrimination, Wayland (2007).

At best, what has been obtainable is ethno-specific efforts targeted at some certain migrant groups, which further creates ethical dilemmas as different groups of refugees and different groups of immigrants receive different levels of assistance which is not sustainable, and also antithetical to recommendations from international organizations whose mandate is to ensure quality and adequate housing as a pressing human right issue.

## 9. RECOMMENDATION

Giving the fact that housing shortages are becoming alarming in Canada, and an emergency approach would go a long way by increase the number of social housing options available to homeless youths across all Canadian provinces and territories. Also, by improving and expanding emergency housing services to homeless youths, including emergency shelters, street outreach, and drop-in centers, family reconnect, and Housing First programs.

Similarly, to improve economic opportunities for migrants and refugees, by resolving the gap between income support and housing cost, which should go hand in hand with improving housing types or options that should be more available and also to strengthened tenants' relationship with the landlord. This can be done by increasing initial settlement assistance, especially for refugee claimants

The Provinces should make dedicated funding available to municipalities for immigrant housing initiatives. However, the municipalities such as the cities and counties on their own end must make information on available and quality housing more available and accessible. Also, more town planning effort is required to inform of asset mapping, which should be used to identify challenges and opportunities, especially for newcomer migrants or refugees.

Lastly, housing providers should collaborate on housing document translation. Housing providers should continue to bring different cultural and ethnic agencies into social housing, and the Social Housing Service Corporation (SHSC) should establish best practices repository of immigration resources. The implementation of these recommendations will require time, money, and system-level commitment.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that each recommendation should be given full consideration as the implementation of these recommendations will result in coordinated and responsive systems that are able to address the needs of refugees and migrant's homelessness.

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